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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [PINR](#) [VM](#)  
SUBJECT: AUGUST 14-16 VISIT OF AMBASSADOR HANFORD TO HCMC: MEETINGS  
WITH CHURCH LEADERS

REF: HANOI 1888; B) HCMC 761 AND PREVIOUS; C) HANOI 1666 AND PREVIOUS

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¶1. (C) Summary: Protestant leaders representing the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) and unregistered house church groups told Ambassador Hanford that they see continuing improvement in religious freedom conditions, even in the Northwest Highlands. Some complained of occasional police harassment of house church congregations in rural areas throughout Vietnam. They called on the central government to do more to enforce the legal framework on religion consistently at the local level and to speed up the process of church recognition and registration. SECV officials acknowledged that certain of their pastors in the Central Highlands province of Dak Lak have sympathies with ethnic minority, "Dega" separatists, complicating the process of church recognition in the Central Highlands. Septel covers Ambassador Hanford's meetings with national and city government officials in HCMC. End Summary.

SECV  
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¶2. (SBU) Pastor Le Van Thien, General Secretary, Pastor Ngo Van Buu, Deputy President, and Pastor Phan Vinh Cu, Deputy General Treasurer of the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) told Ambassador Hanford that conditions for the church have improved notably since Vietnam's legal framework on religion came into effect in early 2005. Many congregations closed in the Central Highlands in 2001 have been reopened. The HCMC government recently approved construction of a new SECV seminary in the city. When operational, the seminary would double the training capacity of the church to 200 pastors per year. Additionally, another 200 preachers in five Central Highlands provinces and Binh Phuoc also will be ordained as pastors following GVN-sanctioned refresher training for preachers in the region. (Note: Under current recognition rules, an SECV church in the Central Highlands cannot be recognized unless it has an ordained pastor in charge. End Note.)

¶3. (SBU) SECV leaders told Ambassador Hanford that they welcomed the initiative of Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung to meet with them in July (ref A). During their visit to Hanoi, the Prime Minister and other GVN officials gave the SECV the "green light" to reunify with the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN), but stated that the process would take time because of friction and disorganization within the ECVN.

¶4. (SBU) However, the SECV wants additional progress, the pastors told Ambassador Hanford. Their major concern is securing the return of 266 properties that were expropriated throughout the SECV's area of operations (Quang Tri to Ca Mau provinces) after 1975. Of these six are of paramount importance: the former SECV headquarters in HCMC and another

key downtown property as well as its four seminaries in Dak Lak, Lam Dong, Khanh Hoa and Danang provinces. The pastors noted that the SECV encounters occasional obstacles when seeking to transfer pastors between localities. This largely affects those pastors who were active in the 1980s and 1990s (when conditions were much more restrictive).

¶5. (SBU) SECV officials complained of a double standard in the GVN recognition process. In areas other than the Central Highlands and Binh Phuoc provinces -- areas where ethnic Vietnamese predominate -- all SECV churches are recognized immediately. However, in the Central Highlands and Binh Phuoc -- ethnic minority areas -- the SECV must apply for recognition church-by-church. Moreover, although many congregations in the Central Highlands have been allowed to reopen, thus far only 60 have been recognized.

¶6. (SBU) We asked if GVN concerns over ethnic minority separatism was a legitimate reason for the government to recognize churches one-by-one in provinces such as Dak Lak (ref B). The SECV leaders acknowledged that they discussed the issue with Ministry of Public Security (MPS) officials in Hanoi during their most recent visit. They told MPS officials that there are "some indications" that those advocating separatism in Dak Lak "may not be SECV pastors, or they [the pastors] may not be acting out of their own will." They added that perhaps these individuals are pushed by those that want to undermine the spread of Protestantism.

#### SECV Leader in the Central Highlands

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¶7. (SBU) The Ambassador also met separately with Pastor Siu Y Kim, a member of the SECV National Executive board and a senior leader from the Central Highlands province of Gia Lai. While acknowledging that all but one SECV congregation in Gia Lai is functioning, Kim complained that the process of church recognition had slowed in recent months. He had submitted 25 applications to the provincial government, but only two have

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been approved. The province has told him informally that it will recognize an additional two every month. This pace is not acceptable to Kim. He also has requested to meet with the new provincial Party Secretary three times since December 2005, but has not yet received a response. The SECV in Gia Lai still awaits a provincial decision to hold a second training course for pastoral candidates. On the positive side, the provincial government has been more responsive on SECV requests to construct churches. One was completed in February 2006, a second is under construction and a third will begin construction shortly.

¶8. (SBU) Kim said the Gia Lai branch of the SECV has 38 outstanding property claims; none have been addressed yet by the government. However, the SECV has had some success elsewhere in having property returned. According to Kim, the provincial government in Dak Lak gave the SECV new tracts of land for a church and a seminary that had been confiscated after 1975. The provincial government in Quang Ngai returned a training facility to the SECV.

#### DEGA a Real Problem for the SECV

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¶9. (SBU) Pastor Kim told the Ambassador that, while he has been able to build a firewall between the SECV and ethnic minority separatists, in Dak Lak there are still significant overlaps between the Dega movement and the SECV. Kim explained that the roots of the problem go back to before 1975, when the FULRO movement (the ethnic minority political and military movement for independence) recruited ethnic minority seminarians from the Buon Ma Thuot (Dak Lak) seminary. Many of these seminarians were sent to reeducation camps after 1975. According to Kim, though the FULRO insurgency ended in 1992, Montagnard Foundation President Kok Ksor sought in 1999 to reestablish a separatist

network in the Central Highlands. He focused on the Protestant community, particularly SECV deacons and preachers, because they were educated and trusted in the community. In Dak Lak, Ksor had success in recruiting members of the SECV; in Gia Lai, Kim and others largely were able to rally the community against the effort. In response, Ksor formed a new, ethno-centric church in Gia Lai called the "Dega Church." This fundamental difference helps explain why the process of normalization of SECV activities in Gia Lai has gone far smoother than in Dak Lak, Kim said. Kim said that the SECV national board is aware of this problem, but has not reached a "clear decision" on how to resolve it.

Pastor Steven  
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¶10. (SBU) Pastor Doan Trung Tin (aka Pastor Steven) of the Vietnam Good News Mission -- a missionary organization active in the Northwest and Central Highlands -- told Ambassador Hanford that most Protestant congregations are allowed to gather, even in the Northwest. Only a handful of congregations -- those where ECVN representatives previously had run-ins with local officials -- are prevented from gathering. Steven noted that when problems arise they tend to be caused by local officials who refuse to implement Hanoi's directives. The Central government, however, has not been as forceful as it could be in ensuring full implementation of the legal framework on religion and reprimanding those officials that violate the law. As a result, there continue to be local religious freedom violations throughout Vietnam. For example, in Ca Mau province in the Mekong Delta, local officials have prevented a Baptist group from gathering. SECV church workers in Kontum province's Sa Thay district -- one of the most oppressive areas in HCMC's AOR -- also continue to face harassment.

¶11. (SBU) Pastor Steven also complained that Protestant believers who apply for identification cards sometimes are rejected if they insist on registering their religion. Those who have not been able to register as Protestants, sometimes have been refused the right to attend house church services. While this problem is most acute in the Northwest Highlands, it has cropped up throughout Vietnam.

¶12. (SBU) Responding to a question from the Ambassador, Pastor Steven confirmed that Ma Van Bay was a respected church deacon serving the ethnic Hmong community in the Northwest Highlands. According to Steven, Bay and two other church workers were arrested in 1996 for "stealing money from local citizens", when the church secured 100,000 VND (roughly USD 10 at that time) in alms from local parishioners. Bay escaped prior to his trial and went into hiding for six years. He was sentenced in absentia to three years in prison for the "theft." Bay was recaptured in November 2003 and sentenced to another three years in prison for the escape. He said MPS officials are reluctant to amnesty Bay because they are embarrassed over his escape.

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The other two church workers were released at the expiry of their original sentences, Steven said. According to documents provided by Steven, Bay's prison term is set to expire in July ¶2009.

House Church Leaders  
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¶13. (SBU) DRL/IRF Advisor Adamson and HCMC PolOff also met in HCMC with four representatives of the unregistered house church community:

-- Pastor Pham Dinh Nhan of the United Gospel Outreach Church and Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship, an umbrella group of 27 house churches with a claimed membership of 250,000 worshipers in 1,500 meeting points,

-- Pastor Nguyen Ngoc Hien of Vietnam Baptist Fellowship Church. Pastor Hien's organization represents 15,000 Baptists in 130

meeting points nationwide, and,

-- Pastor Nguyen Quang Trung, President of the Mennonite Church.  
Pastor Trung's branch of the Mennonite Church claims 10,885 members in 152 meeting points throughout southern Vietnam.

-- Pastor Tran Cong Tan of the Seventh Day Adventist Church. The Seventh Day Adventists claim 12,000 members with 7 church buildings and another 33 meeting points. The HCMC government also registered Pastor Trung's city-wide operations in December 2005. Tan told us that, in July 2006, Danang provincial officials registered one of four Seventh Day congregations. They told Pastor Tan that the other three will be registered as soon as the congregations establish a permanent location of worship.

¶14. (SBU) Overall, the four pastors agreed that conditions for house churches had improved steadily since the legal framework on religion came into effect in 2005. The Mennonite and Seventh Day Adventist pastors told us that none of their churches -- even those outside of HCMC -- have faced any harassment whatsoever since the HCMC government issued its registration decision. They explained that, although the HCMC decision technically is not binding on other jurisdictions, official word had gone out to other provinces that the two groups were fully legal. The two organizations are in the process of formally registering in other provinces.

¶15. (SBU) Pastor Hien told us that he remains frustrated that the central government continues to stall on accepting his group's registration application. On August 14, Hien met in Hanoi with a Vice-Chairman of the national CRA, Nguyen Xuan, to discuss registration. Xuan reportedly said that the CRA was not prepared to accept the Baptist's application because it already has its "hands full" with other petitions and is developing a new application form for registration. Referring to the fact that Henry represents five separate Baptist organizations, Xuan said that the GVN wants to give "smaller groups time to merge" before it accepts their registration petition. The GVN has no right to dictate merger or division of religious organizations, Hien said. The GVN should encourage and accept registrations from any group that wishes to begin the process, without imposing extra-legal conditions, pastors Hien and Nhan said. In particular, Nhan and Hien chafe at a GVN requirement for house churches to list all their members during the registration process. This is not required by the legal framework, and is particularly pernicious as some local officials have used lists submitted by house churches to identify and harass followers.

¶16. (SBU) Detailing a string of police harassments of house church groups -- almost exclusively in remote rural areas --- Pastors Nhan and Hien echoed the views of Pastor Steven that enforcement of the legal framework remains spotty and still depends too much on the goodwill (or lack thereof) of local officials. Even when local officials want to assist, they are unclear of the process, they noted. Nhan and Hien handed us copies of two press articles (scanned original and translation sent EAP/MLS, Embassy Hanoi and DRL/IRF) from a Binh Phuoc provincial newspaper and the Hanoi Youth Union newspaper, extolling local officials and villagers in ethnic minority areas for preventing the spread of Protestantism. They also reported that two church workers were badly beaten in Thanh Hoa province immediately after they met with a church worker who was badly beaten in July (ref C). Local officials initially told the two victims that they were assaulted by highwaymen and the incident had no connection to religious freedom. Provincial and district officials subsequently visited the two victims and told them that they would investigate, but asked them not to report the incident to anyone else. To send a clear message on its commitment to religious freedom, Hanoi needs to punish publicly those who violate the legal framework.

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¶17. (C) Comment: Although frustrated by continuing problems at the local levels, even Pastor Nhan -- the most uncompromising of

mainstream house church leaders --- told us that he is considering applying under the legal framework. Quick GVN approval of pending registrations for the United World Mission Church, Mormons and Baha'i and more robust instructions from Hanoi to local officials to apply the legal framework more consistently would go far to getting Nhan off the fence and beginning the process of registration. It is notable that the National Executive of the SECV acknowledged for the first time what Pastor Kim had told us previously; namely that some of the organization's hierarchy in Dak Lak may be ethnic minority separatist sympathizers, complicating the SECV's registration and recognition process in the Central Highlands. End Comment.

WINNICK